

COMMENTARY

JUNE 1943

SIXPENCE

Miss Thorndike speaks of her early training; of her preferences among the dramatists; of the decay of stage acting under the influence of the films; of Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud and Edith Evans; of Celtic audiences; of the proper function of a producer.

By DAME SYBIL THORNDIKE

● THE DUBLIN GRAND OPERA SOCIETY

The first article in a series on the Operatic and Musical Comedy Societies of Dublin. Mr. Reade writes of the aims of the D.G.O.S., and has critical comments on its conductors, principal singers, chorus and decor.

by Joseph Reade.

4

● DUBLIN THEATRE GUILD AT THE GAIETY

May Carey, Rutherford Mayne and Larry Elyan are the Directors of Ireland's newest theatrical combination. Here are the facts about its formation, its plays, its producers and cast.

by May Carey

● CORK LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT —
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND THE
PRODUCER — SKETCHES OF DONEGAL

edited by SEAN DORMAN

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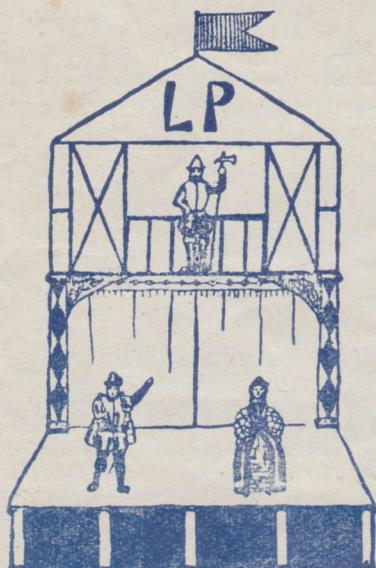
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JUNE, 1943



Answered by Dame Sybil Thorndike

(We continue our questionnaires to celebrities, which are proving so popular, with one this month addressed to one of the greatest of living actresses. Miss Thorndike was preceded in the series by Laurence Olivier and Micheal MacLiammoir. Next month we put our questions to the leading soprano of the London concert platform and operatic stage, Joan Hammond.)

Question: What do you regard as the most useful gifts, from the point of view of acting, with which nature endowed you?

Answer: An actor should have personality and instinct and, if he is to be something more than a good actor, something burning to express. There must be terrific work always. I'm good on work and something to express; I had something to say and terrific energy.

Q.: What part of your early training do you regard as having been most useful to you?

A.: I think Shakespeare repertory. By "repertory" I mean real repertory, not the modern week by week version which passes for repertory. This latter is a wicked imposition, detrimental to any actor. It's more than hard work: it's ridiculous. A real repertory is having a repertoire of ten or eleven plays, which are performed, as they do on the Continent, turn about for two days each. The modern idea of repertory is not repertory at all, but is equivalent to the old-fashioned stock company.

Q.: What were your first parts?

A.: I started acting when I was four, and all the amateur work I did was very valuable. I started as a professional at eighteen, and played all the Shakespearean parts, male and female, that were suitable, and lots that were not suitable. After I had played all the women's parts that were not starred, I finally got to the stars.

Q.: What are your preferences among the playwrights, from the point of view of acting their works?

A.: Shaw, Shakespeare, Ibsen, the Greeks, and,

of the quite moderns, Van Druten, Maugham.

Q.: What general trend have you observed in the style of acting during your career?

A.: The tendency which has come from the pictures of getting everything smaller and smaller and more naturalistic, so much so that in some of the theatres you can't hear what the players are saying at all. To be naturalistic does not mean to be more real, but the public like something that is photographically exact from their training at the films.

Q.: Are you in sympathy with this trend?

A.: No. I'm not. The logical conclusion of this is the films, which is another art. I think that the theatre has gradually decayed from Elizabethan times.

Q.: Whom do you regard as the most accomplished of the younger generation of actors and actresses on the English stage?

A.: Of the men, there are several. I think Laurence Olivier is the most vital. I think also of John Gielgud, but he is of a somewhat older generation. Edith Evans is a great actress, in my opinion. She is *great*. I don't think we have any man of her stature.

Q.: What about audiences. Have they changed?

A.: As I have said, they have changed under the influence of the films. Apart from this, certain places are quicker in their reactions than others. It may be climatic, it may be temperamental. The Welsh are very quick. Anything Celtic is more responsive. I know that from playing recently for Welsh miners. I think that audiences tend to be

the same in the big towns, because they get the same films, use the same make-up, dress in the same clothes. They are much less individualised than they used to be. Individuality is the most marvellous thing in the world, yet they all want to be alike !

Q.: Has the function of the producer been enlarged and elaborated of recent times ?

A.: Oh yes. A lot of actors owe everything to the producer. A producer was merely a director before; now he teaches them how to act. There was always some sort of a stage director, a skipper. You get more unity with a producer, but I think the thing can be overdone. A producer's ideal function is to keep in check or in form a lot

of vital, violently excitable individuals, and not to be just a schoolmaster.

Q.: What do you think of the films from the point of view of the art of the actor ?

A.: They are a frightful danger to any but a real actor who knows exactly what he is doing. Their effect on the young and inexperienced actor is to make him so much underact, that he becomes useless for the theatre. For the theatre, you have to have people ten times larger than life size, and for the films, because of the magnification, they have to be smaller. Actors of less vitality are less effective on the stage, but more effective on the screen. I can't imagine Edith Evans on the films. I think she'd bust them !

OPERA & MUSICAL COMEDY IN DUBLIN

I. THE DUBLIN GRAND OPERA SOCIETY

IN Dublin at the present time, to the writer's knowledge, there are no less than five musical societies flourishing, all amateur, sometimes employing professional guest artists, i.e., musical groups solely concerned with the performance of Opera and Musical Comedy. Two Societies perform Grand Opera exclusively, and the other three range between Light Opera and Musical Comedy. Their work is of such inestimable importance, and the measure of public interest so large, that it is proposed to offer a series of articles dealing with each one of the Societies in detail.

Of the five societies, the Dublin Grand Opera Society is perhaps the youngest, being founded only as late as February, 1941. Originally, most of its members belonged to the elder society, the Dublin Operatic, which still flourishes, but in the beginning of 1941, owing to a difference of opinion, it was decided to break forth on a fresh venture and, so, the new Society was launched at a meeting in the Central Hotel. The first season of Opera was given at the Gaiety Theatre in May, 1941, and the first opera performed was Verdi's *La Traviata*. The programme also included *La Boheme*, *Faust* and *Il Trovatore*. The season proved an enormous success financially, and the work reached a fairly high level of artistry. The future seemed to offer great promise, and those sceptics who held that Dublin was not large

enough to support two operatic companies, were immediately reassured. The second season was given in the autumn of the same year and proved equally successful. Since then the Society has given its two seasons per year without a break, performing eighteen operas altogether.

No constitution has been drafted for the D.G.O.S., but it is hoped to fill this gap at the next general meeting. At the inauguration of the Society it was stated, and agreed upon unanimously, that the chief aims should be:

- (i) To produce the lesser known operas, e.g., *Aida*, *Tannhauser*, *Don Giovanni*.
- (ii) To encourage and employ native-born artists wherever and whenever possible. Two such definite aims are highly commendable, and it is much to the credit of the Society's directors that they have fulfilled these promises to the letter up to the present time. The production of "lesser-known operas" does not imply that the D.G.O.S. intend to present operas which are little known throughout the world, but those which are famous and popular elsewhere, but are little known in Dublin. The production of Verdi's *Aida* last Autumn was the first of this opera for several years past and certainly the first ever by an amateur society. Musically, it surpassed all the previous work of the Society. It would be difficult to forget May Devitt's inexpressibly moving

portrayal of the Ethiopian slave "Aïda"; Patricia Black's dramatic intensity and pure, vocal dexterity in the rôle of "Amneris," the jealous Egyptian Princess, and John Torney's live and virile characterization of "Rhadames," the Egyptian General. The dramatic power, breadth of tone and luxurious colour of the choral singing, has rarely been equalled in Dublin. This production was also especially notable for its lavish décor, a most rare departure from the normal operatic tradition in this respect. The average setting one is forced to gaze upon is infuriatingly dull and shoddy, and in most cases completely anachronistic, so, it was a new and refreshing experience to find an imagination and colourful background. The D.G.O.S. settings have not always been above censure, but of late there has been a decided improvement which, it is to be hoped, will be maintained. While on the subject of décor, mention must be made of costumes and make-up, which, on the whole, call for little criticism beyond the lack of careful planning of the general colour scheme. This should be rectified, as should the matter of the chorus make-up, which in all opera companies is usually extremely bad. Each member of the chorus should be shown how to achieve, at least, a straight make-up. These are the details which lift the presentation about the ordinary level.

The Musical Director of the D.G.O.S. is Commdt. J. M. Doyle of the Army School of Music. Immensely popular with the public and the personnel of the Society, he is a sensitive artist of great energy and firm purpose with a particular flair for the operatic medium. He guides his singers through the complexities of such scores as *Aida* and *Tannhäuser* with calm assuredness, and displays a fine sense of control. Charles Lynch, who is Guest Conductor to the Society, reveals a keen operatic sense and fiery temperament in his reading of such scores as *La Bohème*, *The Barber of Seville* and *La Tosca*. He has a vigorous beat and delights in startling tone contrasts and heavy climaxes. He is a firm believer in the equality of the orchestra with the singers and will never suppress the volume of tone in large tutti. The principal female singers, all guest artists, who help the Society in all its seasons are: May Devitt, a dramatic soprano of full range and lovely quality; Patricia Black, a golden-voiced contralto of immense power and richness; Renée Flynn, a soprano of tender quality and a particularly rare feeling for Mozart opera; Moira Griffith, a

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coloratura soprano; Rita Lynch who sings Mozart with exquisite purity and feeling and without the slightest trace of blemish; and Josephine O'Hagan, whose singing of Musetta in *La Boheme* has been very much praised. Incidentally, Josephine O'Hagan was originally a member of the chorus, from which she graduated as a principal singer. Every member of the chorus is offered the same chance of graduation. Marie Slowey, whose recent performance of "Elvira" in *Don Giovanni* earned her unstinted acclaim, and Nicholas Lewis, a most appealing "Germont" in *La Traviata*, both sprung from the ranks of the chorus. Heading the list of male principals is John Torney, a tenor of fine range and unerring operatic sense; John Lynsky, a bold and full-toned baritone; James Johnston, who possesses a tenor of the loveliest quality, absolutely unforced; and Sam Mooney, who reigns supreme in Mozart opera. Sean Mooney is a recent discovery whose "Valentine" in *Faust* was particularly pleasing.

The D.G.O.S. possesses a fine chorus numbering about a hundred voices, the majority of whom, it seems, are Civil Servants. A slight lessening of the present number might be helpful in many ways. Large choruses are unwieldy and difficult to manage on stage and sometimes the quality of the singing suffers as well, in consequence. A smaller and more highly trained group serves better in the end. Still the D.G.O.S. chorus has done some fine work and the team-spirit habitually displayed is especially commendable.

The business end of the Society lies in the

THE DUBLIN THEATRE GUILD— AN INTERVIEW

YOU want to know about the Dublin Theatre Guild? Well, there are just three of us, Rutherford Mayne, Larry Elyan, and myself. It was Larry's idea originally, and he approached me months ago, but I was busy rehearsing and playing for Hilton Edwards and Shelah Richards at the time and I couldn't see my way to taking on any new venture. The next time he suggested it, however, I began to take an interest in the scheme, and we decided to ask Rutherford Mayne to come in with us, and it gave us great pleasure when he decided to do so—and here we are!

Our first season will be given at the Gaiety Theatre, beginning June 7th, and I think we have

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capable hands of Cmmtdt. W. Kelly (chairman), Miss Anne Clarke (hon. secretary), and Miss M. O'Toole (hon. treasurer). Prof. J. F. Larchet (Mus. Doc.), is the reigning president of the Society and, unlike most holders of such an office, takes an intensely active interest in all the work.

The Society's next season takes place in the autumn, that is, in November, in order to coincide with the Balfe Centenary, which takes place on November 27th. This date falls on a Saturday, and in Ireland it has always been a popular operatic custom to perform either *The Bohemian Girl*, or *The Lily of Killarney*, on Saturday night. On this particular date the D.G.O.S. are presenting a gala performance of *The Bohemian Girl* in commemoration of the Balfe's Centenary. No greater tribute could be paid to the memory of that honoured Irish composer, than to have his favourite opera performed by an all-Irish company of such tremendous capabilities.

by May Carey

what should prove to be a programme of interesting plays by contemporary dramatists: George Bernard Shaw, Sir James Barrie, A. J. Cronin, and Lillian Hellman.

We are opening with Shaw's brilliant comedy, *Major Barbara*; it is amazingly topical, and we have a cast which will, I think, do it full justice. Vivien Dillon will play "Barbara"; she has been absent too long from the Dublin stage, and it's grand that she is able to play for us this season. Larry Elyan—you remember his excellent performance in *The Strings are False*—will play "Undershift." The "shelter" scene promises to be very exciting, and we have a young actor from

Cork, Eddie Mulhare, in the part of "Bill Walker," so well played on the screen by Robert Newton. It is his first part at the Gaiety, and I think he has a great sense of character, and should be very useful to the Dublin stage. Then we have such well-known actors as Bob Hennessy, Val Vousden, Eve Watkinson, Ann Penhallow, Harry Brogan, Paddy Carey, Rita O'Dea, Wilfred Brambell, etc., all putting up good performances.

Our second play is A. J. Cronin's *Jupiter Laughs*. This play was presented by the Ulster Group Theatre in Belfast some weeks ago, when it ran for seven weeks to capacity houses, so we decided that it would be a good gesture to invite them to play it here. I think Alan McClelland gives an outstanding performance as the cynical doctor; and Gwyndolyn Stewart is grand as the Matron. It is an interesting play and good theatre, and, like most of Cronin's work, deals mainly with doctors, hospitals, and nurses, so it should appeal to the medical profession.

Our third production is Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*, which I think is his best play, partly because there is not quite so much "whimsy" in it as most of his other plays. It has not been done in Dublin, I think, since Norah Lumsden and I put it on at the Gate Theatre about ten years ago, when we played to record houses. We are playing it in period costume. Vivien Dillon and Billy O'Gorman should be ideal as "Maggie Wylie" and "John Shand," and I am playing the French "Comtesse." It is the only part I am playing this season, as I find so much to do in other directions and I have played it before so it doesn't entail much work.

Our fourth, last, and most difficult production is that of *The Little Foxes*. It is by Lillian Hellman, whose play, *Watch on the Rhine*, is drawing all London at the present moment, and I consider it very fine drama. It requires good acting, but it is up to us to select a cast that will give the play its due. Vivien is working hard in Bette Davis' part—a new type of part for her. The part of her husband, played on the screen by Herbert Marshall, will be played by that grand actor Liam Gaffney, whilst the part of "Birdie" will give Eve Watkinson the chance of a life-time. It is a bitter play, but strong and dramatic from beginning to end, and it appeals to me because it shows up so subtly and so magnificently the misery of those who spend their lives seeking happiness through the medium of money.

Producers? Well, there are four producers, a different one for each play, which I think is a good thing because it stimulates interest. *Major Barbara* is being produced by "Hammie" Benson, with that apparently effortless efficiency that never seems to be doing anything, but is really doing everything! *Jupiter Laughs* is being produced by Harold Goldblatt, who produced it so well in Belfast. He is a Director of the Group Theatre, full of vitality and driving force, rather like Hilton Edwards, and a good actor. Incidentally, he will be playing "Dr. Drewitt" in this play as well as producing. *What Every Woman Knows* will be produced by Ellinor Mathews; she has produced many Trinity plays, and, together with Hans Drechsler, has been responsible for the production of *Noah* and another play which have both won the Dramatic Prize at the Father Matthew Feis. I think Ellinor has a definite flair for production, and this will be her first professional engagement. I am producing *The Little Foxes* myself. I have every confidence in the cast, which I have chosen myself; in fact I have chosen all the casts, with the approval of the other Directors, of course.

The sets will be designed by the Gaiety's clever scenic designer, Bob Heade, and his assistant Cummings (brother of Peggy), and we are fortunate in securing that pearl among stage directors, Cecil Forde. Sorry, I must go. I have to look at some designs for costumes with Chris Keely, see Bob about the staircases for *Little Foxes*, and then take a rehearsal, so good-bye.

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THE LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT IN CORK

by James Stack

(*Mr. Stack is the Producer of the Cork Little Theatre Society.*)

LIKE most group-foundations our Little Theatre Society at its inception seven years ago was a mixture of enthusiasm and caution. The enthusiasm was momentarily used up in the founding, and caution had its own way. Innate business-sense, reinforced by circumstance, was responsible for the initial and sustained choice of plays which could be supposed popular. The circumstances were that the Society was financially an infant and yet was forced to play in the large and inevitably expensive Opera House. There were, of course, a fair number of smaller halls in Cork but, in many, the size of the stage excluded their use and in all there was the problem of seating. Dance halls normally, they greeted the appearance of the actor with resentful shrieks and harsh scraping noises. In one alone, the Father Matthew Hall, were there some rows of fixed seats, but there were not enough of them and the difficulty remained. "Popular" plays, therefore, seemed to hold the only hope of breaking the vicious circle: Opera House, low funds. With plays of an extended denominator we might some day make enough money to build a little theatre of our own, within whose walls the enthusiastic and the cautious could shake hands, at one in their love of the play.

Financial progress towards this goal has been rather disheartening. We have moved forward, but the tempo of the advance has been slow, and building is expensive. But there have been consolations. For example we have satisfied ourselves experimentally that the "popular" play is something of a myth here in Cork. For many years we did produce plays which, we supposed, fell within the category. But there came a time when the ebullience of a fresh young society could no longer be contained. We wanted a fling, and we had it: *Othello*. Two nights lived amid the magnificent theatre of Shakespeare; two nights during which, we could, crowd or no crowd, live in that richly-populated, vital world! We knew that the audience counted, that excellence in it was a supreme stimulus, raising our inspirations and efficiencies to a height. But we counted on Shakespeare's bigness to make everything possible.

We had our fling—we got our audience! Surprise and Success walked together those two nights, a delightful and eager pair.

It would be asking too much to expect that this experience should cause a revolution in our policy. Revolutions can be expensive. They were luxuries which we felt we had to deny ourselves. Remember that *Othello* was an occasion, a theatrical gala-day, the success of which we greeted with something approaching astonishment. Below the astonishment and gratification there remained the solid feeling that we were a young society which, up to that time, had been doing not too badly. We preferred—we had to prefer—the solid earth to insubstantial chance. Our audiences of Corkmen had lived with us and helped us during the few years of our existence. All that we could conclude from their acceptance of *Othello* was that they either were curious about the combination of Shakespeare and ourselves, or that they liked Shakespeare. We did not feel justified in judging that they liked him in large doses, still less that they would stomach the more difficult of the moderns.

There followed a pause, while we recovered from the first excitement and gathered energy for the next experiment. How much of Shakespeare could Cork take? During the interval we performed the *Light of Heart*, and a new play, *Let Erin Forget*, by Sheila May. True to tradition, they did fairly good business.

The day of the experiment in Shakespeare arrived—*Othello* again, but this time for a whole week. This was in November, 1942. A dual experiment, really, because for the first time we had booked the Opera House for two consecutive weeks. Prompted, possibly, by a nice instinct for balancing present with past, or perhaps with an eye to the relief brought by variety, we decided to run the light comedy, *Quiet Week-End*, during the second week. Here again our ambitions were crowned. *Othello* played to bigger and better audiences than did the comedy. Cork obviously not only can stomach Shakespeare but likes him. A conclusion we hope not to forget.

What turned out to be the well-attended funeral of our notion of the "popular" play was our last production, *The Cradle Song*. Its slight delicate music, its scarcely ruffled peace, seemed incapable of drawing crowds. But it drew as many people as a large number of our past "popular" plays had, so that now we have been set thinking, and

who is to judge where thought may lead us !

During our history we have played twenty-two plays, appearing two or three times a year for a period usually of a week. We have not done badly, even if we could have done better. Now with our energetic Committee—Cecil Marchant, Fred Archer, Alan Scholdice, Sylvia O'Shaughnessy, and Leo Collins; with our able stage-designer, Alec R. Day; and among an acting membership of thirty, lucky in the possession of actors like Edward Golden, Geraldine Neeson,

Liam Archer, Annette Marchant, and Sylvia O'Shaughnessy; and rich with recent experience, we look forward to a future which may hold such names as: *The Enemy of the People*, *King Lear*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Seagull*, *Dona Clarines*.

Is there any chance that it may hold, too, a figure or group of figures waving magic wands, or treasury notes, it doesn't matter which, who will give to us what, by a strange irony, Cobh already has, a comfortable and compact little theatre, where we can play the plays of our choice ?

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND THE PRODUCER

(*Mr. Izon is the well-known Producer to Lord Longford's Gate Theatre Company. We publish here the first part of an article on Shaw, the second part of which will appear in our following issue.*)

PRODUCERS sometimes complain that Bernard Shaw, when writing his plays, puts down everything to the last comma, leaving nothing to them. Play scripts, they say, must be mediums, not the last word.

Let us examine a little into this. Roughly speaking, there are two kinds of producers. First, there is the "theatrical" producer, the producer of the school of Reinhardt, Gordon Craig and Meyerhold of Russia. Work of this kind is practically unknown in this country, and has been seen in England only through the productions of Terence Gray at the Cambridge Festival Theatre and the productions of Komissarjevsky at Stratford and in London. Komissarjevsky relates, in his book *Myself and the Theatre*, how Meyerhold, after working for a time in Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, revolted against the "naturalism" of that theatre, and broke away from it and set up a theatre of his own. There he played the wildest pranks with the classics—Shakespeare, Moliere, Gogol—producing them in the so-called expressionist manner, and wrenching and distorting everything to fit a particular theory. In other words, here you have the ascendancy of the producer over the dramatist carried to an extreme limit. In Shaw's day, the writer was obviously too much to the fore. Then, after the last war, the theatre was flooded during the twenties with ideas and theories about production, and as a result the producer now dominates the theatre to too great an extent.

The other kind of producer regards himself as a medium for the exact interpretation of the author's intentions, which is by no means the same thing as

by John Izon

saying that he binds himself on all occasion to follow the script literally. He does not believe in his right, after the manner of Meyerhold, to stamp his own theory and personality upon each and every play to the extent of distorting them, if necessary, to fit the mould he has designed for them, but he considers that every play requires a different approach, or treatment. If, for instance, he is dealing with a play which lends itself to pageantry and colour, he will feel himself justified in filling out and decorating the script with all the embellishments of lighting, costume and music. He also is absolutely at liberty and has a perfect

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right to alter doors, windows, completely change the pattern of movement, and improve on the stage "business," if he can, and Shaw would doubtless agree with all this, because after all these things, though important, are not the living breath of the play. They represent but the dry mechanical details. In a Shaw play, they are always subordinate to the speaking of Shaw's lines, which require a delivery as difficult to acquire, and as specialised as the speaking of Shakespeare's blank verse.

Shaw covered his script with stage directions and lengthy observations, in order to make them readable, because at one time no one would perform his plays, and his only market for them was in book form. He also did so as a safeguard against stupid actors and managers distorting and misinterpreting his work. To employ his own phrase, he made them "actor-proof." A further motive for, so to speak, producing his own work on the script, was that when he began writing there was no such person as a producer in the modern sense; there was only somebody called the stage manager, who did a great deal of the modern producer's work, and sometimes the author directed his own play himself. (Gilbert produced all the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and evolved all the business which has now become traditional.) Very grateful the producer ought to be that Shaw has indicated so fully stage positions, moves and business; that he has given such lengthy descriptions of character, psychology and costumes, all of which he has worked out most carefully, presumably while writing the play. What a pleasant contrast it provides with the script of an unskilful dramatist, in which little or no attempt has been made to face the hundred and one practical problems which have to be faced when it comes to putting the play on the stage. I cannot think of a

single Shaw play in which all such details have not been considered. What would we not give to have the original prompt copy of, let us say, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with all his original "business," annotations and expression marks! Let us at least be grateful that we have Shaw's.

Not only has Shaw considered the practical details, but he has worked them out most beautifully. He had mastered the technique of the theatre by watching plays as playgoer and dramatic critic, before he ever started writing them. This, together with his instinct for the drama, gave him a mastery of stagecraft. All this is borne out in Hesketh Pearson's recent book on Shaw, in the biographies of famous actors, and by actors to whom I have spoken personally who have been produced by Shaw. All speak of his vast experience of theatre craft and his extraordinary understanding of the psychology of actors. He has studied acting deeply and is himself a born actor. He knows every possibility and limitation of the human voice in the theatre. Hesketh Pearson quotes Sybil Thorndike as saying that the most wonderful experience of her life was when Shaw read to her for the first time the script of *St. Joan*, his profound understanding of character, his inflexions and modulations and the music of his voice, when Lewis Casson and she visited him at his home in Hertfordshire. Lillah McCarthy, in her biography *Myself and My Friend*, gives intimate descriptions and illustrations of Shaw's brilliance as a producer. The producer who thinks he can improve on Shaw must, therefore, be either very eminent or very sure of himself. Shaw's experience and grasp of practical detail is well illustrated in his advice to a producer contained in his pamphlet *On the Art of Rehearsal*.

(To be concluded in our next issue.)

RESTAURANT JAMMET

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SKETCHES OF DONEGAL (IX)

THE matter of supplies was one requiring thought and organisation. In peace time, and in the early days of the war, two vans only, calling each of them once a week, ventured their tyres upon the sharply winding, steeply ascending and descending, flinty road which penetrated up and into the heart of the mountains and linked Graneen with the small towns of the coast. (It was only after I had cut to pieces, in a matter of a few weeks, a pair of stout new brogues, that I adopted hobnailed boots as the sole form of footwear able to withstand the loose and jagged stones which are the surface of a Graneen road.) One van made its rounds every Tuesday, the other every Friday. The Tuesday van, well stocked with a variety of goods, was the first to disappear, as the increasing shortage of petrol forced its owner to economise upon fuel consumption. His mountain clients were very much poorer than the owners of the fatter farms down by the coast, and, since economies had to be exercised, it was better to surrender his small trade with them for the time being. Also, the mountain roads made, proportionally, a much heavier demand on fuel than the leveller arteries of the coast. The Friday van was more persistent, although, as the war years drew on, its appearance became highly erratic. It was so meagrely furnished with provisions as to be almost useless. Its owner, a grey-haired man with an aggressive yellow eye, kept a shop that, as well as being a general store, was also a public house, and he was his own best bar patron. He was *offensively* aggressive when drunk, and *defensively* aggressive when sober, because on the latter occasions his wife suspected him of being in progress of getting drunk again, and her attitude, over the years, had caused him to imagine that the rest of the world did also. This trait made it well nigh impossible to deal with him without causing him offence. Adopt as friendly an air as you might, speak in as dulcet a tone as you could assume, throw into your opening phrases every cautious and polite circumlocution of which you were master, he would listen to you with an air of deepest reserve. If you enquired after his health, his eye would flash as much as to say, "I suppose you think I'm drinking myself to death!" If you asked successively whether he had any cheese, cereals, sugar, candles, oatmeal, bacon, he would

by Sean Dorman

reply in the negative to each more and more politely phrased and tentatively made enquiry, his voice becoming steadily more sullen, as much as to say, "I suppose you think I drink all me profits, instead of using them to replenish my stocks" (which was precisely the case). His negative replies always took the form, "No, not *this week*," a fierce emphasis on the final words, challenging you to disprove if you could the proposition that this was but a temporary shortage, and not the general state of affairs. In point of fact, in comparison with his van, Mother Hubbard's cupboard was an ostentatiously overstocked affair. I could only assume that he made his round at all, for the sake of buying the eggs of Brigid and other of my neighbours. Certainly eggs were the sole form of provisions of which he always had a plentitude, and sometimes, if my last consignment from Brigid had run out, I would get some from him for convenience. This transaction always placed him in a dilemma, for, if he did not charge me the full market price, he was letting money slip through his fingers, and, if he did, he thereby made known in the valley the current market price, and hence what his profit was. This was a point upon which he preferred to keep the others, from whom he had to buy his eggs, as much in the dark as possible. Finally, he would close the doors at the back of the van with a defiant crash, and mount glowering into the seat beside a timid youth whom he employed to drive, his own hand lacking the necessary certainty. The van, after a number of preliminary failures, would crawl away up the hill. There was no money to spend either on its replacement or its repair, and it was constantly breaking down. The road along which he approached was constructed in a huge sweep to skirt round the edge of an impassable portion of the bog, so that I could watch the progress of the van towards me for upward of a mile. Within that space, I had seen him draw up as many as three times, descend, and his head and shoulders vanish into the bonnet as he carried out mysterious repairs upon the engine. Between each repair, the van would crawl on again in a manner suggesting a dying animal dragging itself to sanctuary. Sometimes, instead of appearing in the early afternoon, according to its schedule, it would not arrive until seven or even nine o'clock in the evening, or often, when the

breakdown was complete, not until the next day. On one occasion, at the dance down at the coast town where Wee Manus played the drums in the band, and which was also the locale of the van owner's shop, two men had the slightest of differences over a matter of the price of cattle—a quarrel which a few more minutes would have healed. The van-owner, very drunk, conceiving it his duty to separate them, rushed to his home, which was only a few paces away, and returned with a shot gun. This he pointed at the astonished and alarmed disputants, exhorting them to keep the peace. The latter, their surprise and fright giving way to high indignation, hurled themselves at him as one man, and only the most energetic intervention on the parts of their fellow dancers saved him from a severe mauling.

My chief source of supply, however, was Maggie, the owner of the small hotel in neighbouring Meenadore where Brigid's daughter, Agnes, sometimes worked in the summer. Maggie, despite her fifty years, possessed a great quantity of red hair, and was known throughout the entire district as Maggie Rudh, or Red Maggie. Her fame was due to her wide trading relations, which extended as far as the county capital, Letterkenny, and even to Derry itself. She had stocks of goods in her small shop, attached to the hotel, of an abundance and variety no one else possessed. When transport became curtailed and lorries no longer visited Meenadore, as far as which the good metalled road, which petered out into a mountain track shortly afterwards, reached, she had the energy to take the bus in person to Letterkenny, and return thence loaded with provisions in which she enjoyed, as the result of her enterprise, a monopoly. This monopoly she knew how to exploit, and she recouped not only her bus fare and her time, but was able to add something to that substantial bank balance which she hoped would yet attract a husband to her. Certainly her bank balance constituted her greatest charm, for she suffered visibly from a dropped stomach and, since she found her false teeth uncomfortable and would never wear them save to chapel, was toothless. The tentacles of her business connections stretched out not only to Derry, Letterkenny and Dungloe in the matter of provisioning, but also to Dublin, Belfast, and even Scotland and England, in the matter of regular summer visitors who put up under her shrewdly hospitable roof. She could not bear to turn away so much as a passing cyclist student, a mere night's visitor, who would thereby be driven to put up at Meenadore's other hotel not

three hundred yards away, which, though attractive enough, was always somehow half empty when Maggie had had to surrender her own bed and sleep in the parlour on her broad horsehair couch. If yet more room had to be found, she would make Agnes give up her room and share the couch with her. The very notion of the fresh young girl supporting such a proximity with Maggie Rudh's hideous carcase always caused me a qualm, but it would never so much as have occurred to the stolid Agnes herself that she might experience any revulsion. Maggie Rudh's disinclination to wear her teeth modified not only her appearance, but also her speech. It was difficult enough in ordinary circumstances to distinguish what she was saying, but, being conscious of this fact, she had developed the habit of repeating each remark without any pause between, and with the rapidity of machine-gun fire, under the mistaken impression that the multiplicity of statement would make it certain that she would be understood, whereas it had the contrary effect. The more times she repeated a

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PERSONAL ATTENTION BY TONY

remark, the faster she had to talk, in order to fit the repetitions into a single breath and a reasonably confined space of time. The less you understood her, the more repetitions she piled into the overloaded moment and the more indistinct she became, until finally she was talking so fast that the only movement of her lips was a continuous flutter, and the only sound that issued from them a low burble. Her shop had its own entrance, separate from that of the hotel. As you pushed open the door, its top struck a small bell hanging from the low ceiling by a length of string, causing it to tinkle in announcement of your arrival. A moment later it tinkled again as, upon your stepping through the doorway, your head struck it. It was impossible to remember this fiendishly low-hung bell, and the blow it regularly struck you on the head did not serve to sweeten your temper for the difficult verbal encounter through which you were about to pass. The bell would no sooner have ceased to ring for the second time, than Maggie Rudh's collapsed physique would appear in the doorway between her kitchen and the shop. She would show her toothless gums in a witch-like cackle, intended as a pleasant greeting to a good

customer, and her lips would begin to flutter.
"How are you to-day how are you to-day how are you to-day?"

As I have not been able to distinguish a syllable of this, I decide to ignore it, and conserve my strength to concentrate upon interpreting her answers to such minimum—an absolute minimum—of questions as it shall be necessary to put.

"Hello Maggie. I see you have some cereals. May I have a packet?"

"They're not for sale. They're not for sale."

"Excuse me?"

"They're not for sale, they're not for sale they're not for sale they're not for sale."

I manage to catch the words "not" and "sale" and, knowing Maggie, divine her meaning. She has a habit of using her shop as a storeroom for her hotel rather than as a place where the general public may purchase supplies. Her shelves may be comparatively filled with hams, sides of bacon, bricks of butter, tinned vegetables, fruits, soups, matches and cigarettes, pots of jam, but, when it comes to brass tacks, the goods of which she is actually willing to dispose narrow down to a variety of horrible variously coloured jellies of which she always keeps an enormous quantity. I once ate for supper one of these jellies, of a dismal purple colour reminiscent of Deadly Nightshade, and retired to bed that night idly turning over in my mind the possibility of my not awakening again to see the following dawn. I suffered no harm, save that the jelly, which had had no taste whatever when I had consumed it the night before, left a strong and not wholly pleasant taste in my mouth the whole of the following day. The rest of her stores Maggie Rudh kept for the feeding of her guests. Whether the law would have supported her in her practice of displaying goods for sale, which she subsequently refused to sell, I never chose to dispute, for to do so would have involved the necessity of putting up under her roof for the night, by the time that anything had been made out of the machine-gun stutter of her replies. I contented myself with drawing from her what I could, by compliments and badinage on the one hand, and veiled and threatening references, on the other, to the way the neighbourhood was being stripped of its food supplies by visitors from the Six Counties, who left behind in their place nothing but British pound notes, which, whatever their virtues, were not edible, while we, the local people, went without. This hint caused her to eye me as a dangerously enlightened revolutionary,

who might even, if not placated, raise the matter back in Dublin and cause her to be stripped of those same crisp British pound notes of which she had collected so handsome a store.

It must not be supposed that Maggie was without her admirers. She had one. He was a man with a lean face the colour of bark, and a lantern jaw that moved up and down like a nutcracker when he spoke. I always, to myself, called him Hatchet Face. Hatchet Face had work quarrying and stone-breaking on the metalled road, which was being steadily extended. In his spare time he sat in Maggie's kitchen, doing rough mending of shoes. The work was a labour of love, and he charged only for the expense of the materials employed. When he mended my brogues, cut to pieces by the roads of Graneen, but not quite past saving, he could be persuaded to accept only a plug of tobacco in payment. He was a mild man. He spoke seldom, and then briefly, and when he did so he sounded like a dog barking. What with his taciturnity, and her incomprehensibility, the courtship had made little progress in the past fifteen years. Between them there was a great verbal gulf fixed. The greater part of the small hotel—rather a lodging-house than a hotel—was furnished after what Maggie fancied to be a modern style, of which she was inordinately proud, that is, it was as tasteless and unhygienic as the average Irish interior. In the sitting-dining-room, which the lodgers used, just across the hall from her kitchen, closely drawn lace curtains vied with small windows for the honour of excluding the clear mountain air and the light from heaven. Ancient rugs, unnecessary decrepit pieces of furniture, and too many corners, busily secreted dust and disease. Framed reproductions of Donegal scenery, tritely drawn and simpering coloured, cluttered up the walls, the testament of a nation that knows nothing of the art of painting and neglects its artists. Maggie's own kitchen, which made no attempts at modernity and was fashioned nearer to the pattern of a cottage kitchen, was better. There was a flagged floor; a plain wooden kitchen table; an open fireplace serving both for warmth and cooking purposes, which, if a good deal more elaborate than a cottage hearth, had an obvious cousinship with it; and a wooden spinning wheel on which Maggie in the winter spun her own yarn, which she sent to the weaver to be woven into lengths of tweed, and subsequently sold to her guests at a neat profit. She would sit on one side of the hearth turning a

portion of meat on a spit, and Hatchet Face would sit on the other, stolidly hammering a shoe on a last. Every now and again Maggie's cracked witch-like voice would rally him.

"Are you mending the shoes? Are you mending the shoes?"

Hatchet Face, puffing at his pipe and not looking up from his work, utters his sharp dry bark. "Eh?"

"Are you mending the shoes are you mending the shoes are you mending the shoes are you mending the shoes?"

"Aye."

He has not understood a word, nor does he make any particular attempt to do so. For years he has limited his part in these intimate conversations to this "Eh" and "Aye." She gives a fiendish cackle, intended to express the height of coquetry, and goes on turning the meat.

Her almost invariable form of badinage is to suggest that any work to which you may have put your hand will fail, or that any hopes that you may entertain will be disappointed. This is highly irritating for a sensitive person, but has no more effect on the nerves of Hatchet Face than a blow with a twig on the rump of a cow.

Maggie cackles. "Them shoes is done for. Them shoes is done for."

"Eh?"

"Them shoes is done for them shoes is done for them shoes is done for."

"Aye."

"No use mending them."

"Eh?"

"No use mending them no use mending them."

"Aye."

He continues to mend them.

"I suppose you think you'll get more leather!"

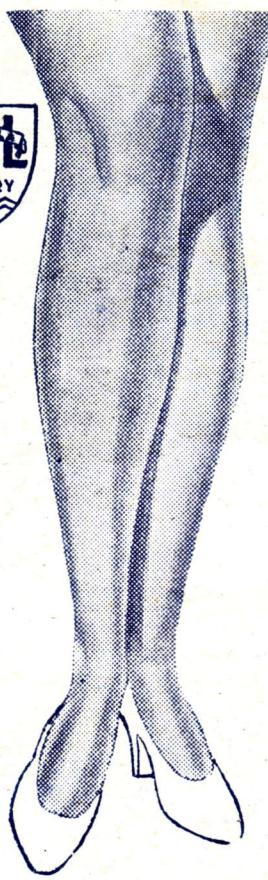
"Eh?"

"I said: you'll get no more leather you'll get no more leather."

"Aye."

Summer had now passed into autumn. It was a strange and mysterious time of the year. The countryside in general, that is the mountain flanks and bogland, had lost nothing of its colouring. There were no trees to shed their leaves and bring desolation to the landscape, the rich blends of the highlands dwelt immutable in the mosses and grasses, and the bold rocks and the wild sky changed not summer and winter, winter and summer. The happy yellow summertide gone, the brown sadness of autumn in the air, memories of

past friends and the yearning glance, deep, deep, of a perpetual farewell—of this there was nothing. But there was mystery. It dwelt in the fields. But a few weeks before, tall oats and dark green potato rows had lined each side of the cart track from Meenadore to Graneen, just where, after sweeping round the foot of Mount Shanoun, it mounts to a high plateau before tumbling down again into the valley of Graneen. Now, in late October, for the harvest comes sulkily in the mountains, the oats were in ricks thatched with rushes, and the potatoes dug up and buried under long chocolate mounds of earth, looking like coffins. The turf had been removed from the small stacks, into which it had been piled near the bogs from which it had been cut, and had been built up into huge stacks by the lee end wall of the cottages, where it would receive some shelter from the weather and could be easily fetched in, as needed, to feed the winter fire. Everywhere was nature drawing in after the activity of summer, building its shelters, filling its granaries, against the dark short days of winter, the time of little work and long waiting. I stood on the high windy plateau. At my back was the cone of Mount Shanoun, aspiring to the pale sky. Before me was a short stretch of flat bogland, funeral chocolate and black, with its deep coloured earth and bizarrely twisted stumps and branches, the skeletal reliques of a dead forest. These shrunken withered ghosts of a once-wooded landscape are peculiar to Graneen and its environs, and the cattle blocks at the gaps into fields are frequently constructed out of these petrified, fantastically writhing branches. Beyond the bog, at the very edge of the plateau, was a cluster of sturdy cottages and byres, their snow white walls contrasting strangely with their black corrugated iron roofs, and the dark mounds of turf piled hard by the end wall. Nothing stood beyond them. The ground fell away out of sight, only to appear again in the middle distance as a mountain chain. The plateau itself was in deepest shadow, but the chain of mountains was lighted by shafts of sunlight that escaped in a pale misty yellow effulgence out of a rent in a cloud. Black and white, dark and shine, strange contrasts, like a setting in a theatre. Far off, on the lower levels, the fields stood in stubble and the long black coffins were everywhere. The wind, touched with the first bitterness of winter, sighed over the shelterless plateau, and the cottages stood alone on the edge of the world.



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